

A Hermit in Arcadia

BY ALICE BROWN

IT was a pulsating noon in the spring of the year. Adam Field dusted the flour from his hands and came to the door of his little house, to salute the weather. He was the hermit of the Tristram Woods, and this was his baking-day. Four pies, desirably browned, stood on the kitchen table, and the dough he had given its second moulding was set in the pans to rise. These were duties past; but his pleasures lay out-of-doors, and he came forth to seek them. He was a tall, great-shouldered creature with bronze-red hair and a freckled face. The line of his profile swept nobly from brow to chin, and at first sight he justified the exactions of beauty as applied to men.

But looking longer at him, it would be found that all this strength of moulding and outline was pathetically softened by his eyes. They were dog's eyes, brown and seeking, and by no means knowing what they sought. He was dressed in a gingham shirt and gray trousers, and he wore a blue checked apron. The apron he untied, and turning, hung it on a nail by the door, moving with the air of one who does an accustomed act from an added precision because he hates it. Returned to man's estate by the removal of the belittling garment, he seemed to free his soul and let it rove abroad among the delicate riches of the day.

His house, gray-lichened in its antiquity, stood on the shore of Tristram Pond, and the little clearing about it was fringed by trees, now lustily prickling into green. So lucent was the green, and yet so pervasive, that it held every coign of the forest like an ardent mist. It seemed to rise and waver before Adam's vision, and his responsive senses told him he might almost bathe in it. He was at one with the woods, not even owning in his heart that he loved them, but yet ab-

sorbed into their thrilling life. Suddenly, while his eyes were fixed on a group of birches marking out the path about the pond, they parted, and a girl stood there framed in green.

"Gee!" said Adam Field. It was the old situation, a man and a maid; but he found himself as disturbed by it as if the one of them had been Adam the First, and the other, Eve. The day and the season smelt so new that the girl seemed new also.

Yet she was not in any sense remarkable to the generalizing glance—a slight thing with a brown face and brown hair growing in a one-sided peak on her forehead. Her eyes only were unusual. They were large and dark, and at this moment they held the gypsy glint. The hermit met them and could not look away. Their gleam bewitched him. He had an impulse to walk forward in response, but as he laid a hand upon the easing of the door, to be assured of something solid, the girl smiled. Her face crinkled up; the brown pool of the eyes broke also, and Adam was released. He drew a quick breath, and passed a hand before his eyes. The girl came lightly forward. She held a withe, and stripped it as she walked.

"Are you the hermit?" she inquired.

Adam frowned. "I should like to know," said he, fractiously, "if a chap can't go off and live by himself without being called names!"

"What's anybody want to go off by themselves for?" asked the girl, with an outward indifference, and yet some keenness of veiled interest.

"Because they're sick of the whole damned show!"

She looked at him in a fashion so gravely indulgent that Adam's heart gave one quick throb: for he thought of his apron. Then he remembered having taken it off, and he blessed his stars.

"She said you had a lovely voice," re-

marked the girl, with a smooth irrelevance.

"Who?"

"Melissa Beane. She that was Melissa Hawkins."

The slow red crept into his face and suffused it. Many thoughts were surging within him, but none such as he could utter. For certain reasons he felt that Melissa Hawkins had the sorry right to say anything she pleased about him.

"She told me how you looked," continued the girl, dispassionately, "but you ain't half so freckled as I expected."

The pin-prick hurt. His mates at school had taunted him with freckles, and that old nerve had life enough to thrill.

"I ain't the only one in the world that's freckled," said he; but the girl interrupted him sweetly:

"Do you mean me? Oh no! I ain't freckled. I'm tanned, that's all. You had better see to your oven. Something's burning."

Adam could never explain why he felt so hopelessly at her mercy. She seemed to possess an infinite power of deriding him, and he was the more undone because he felt, at the bottom of his soul, that she could soothe with an equal potency. She hurt him, and undoubtedly wished to hurt; yet mingled with his inner protest against the injustice of that onslaught was an unreasoning desire to go to her for comfort. But the girl, as if she knew nothing about these warring subtleties, looked at him with satirical eyes. Within the man waves of resolution were mounting high. No power on earth should force him to acknowledge before his arch tormentor that ovens and other household gear were not things afar from him.

"There's nothing to burn," said he, firmly.

She swept the words aside in wholesale scorn. "I guess I know!" said she. "You just let me look!" She brushed past him, crossed the kitchen and opened the oven door. Burned pastry and trickling juices met her in a steaming cloud, and she spoke warmly, yet with some indulgence, as one to an inferior in a kindred art. "I'd be ashamed! They were elegant pies and you've let 'em run all to waste."

Deft as some trained ministrant, she caught a dish-towel from the nail and took out the pies. She set them on the table beside the others, and regarded them with true sorrow.

"The crust is as flaky as ever I see," she remarked, as if confiding in some sympathetic deity. "And you've let it burn to a crisp." Then she turned upon him with a hateful smile, and asked, insinuatingly, "You fond of cooking?"

"No!" thundered the hermit. But he was breathlessly content, seeing her inside his door. Keen desire flashed up in him to keep her there.

"What makes you do it, then?" She seated herself, like a bad fairy, on a stool in the chimney corner, and looked at him with impudent eyes. Instantly Adam Field judged and classified his deftness about the house. He had always hated woman's work, though he gave it great attention because it was his religion to do all things well. Now it seemed to him not merely dull, but most unmanly.

"Somebody's got to do it," he returned, lamely.

"If you'd married Melissa, she'd have done it for you."

He made no answer, even to voice a sudden inward relief that he had not married Melissa, with her yellow hair and her look of eternal Sabbaths.

"If you'd married Melissa," continued his tormentor, calmly, "I should be visiting you both. I'm staying with her mother, but your house is bigger than the one Melissa lives in now; so she'd have had me there."

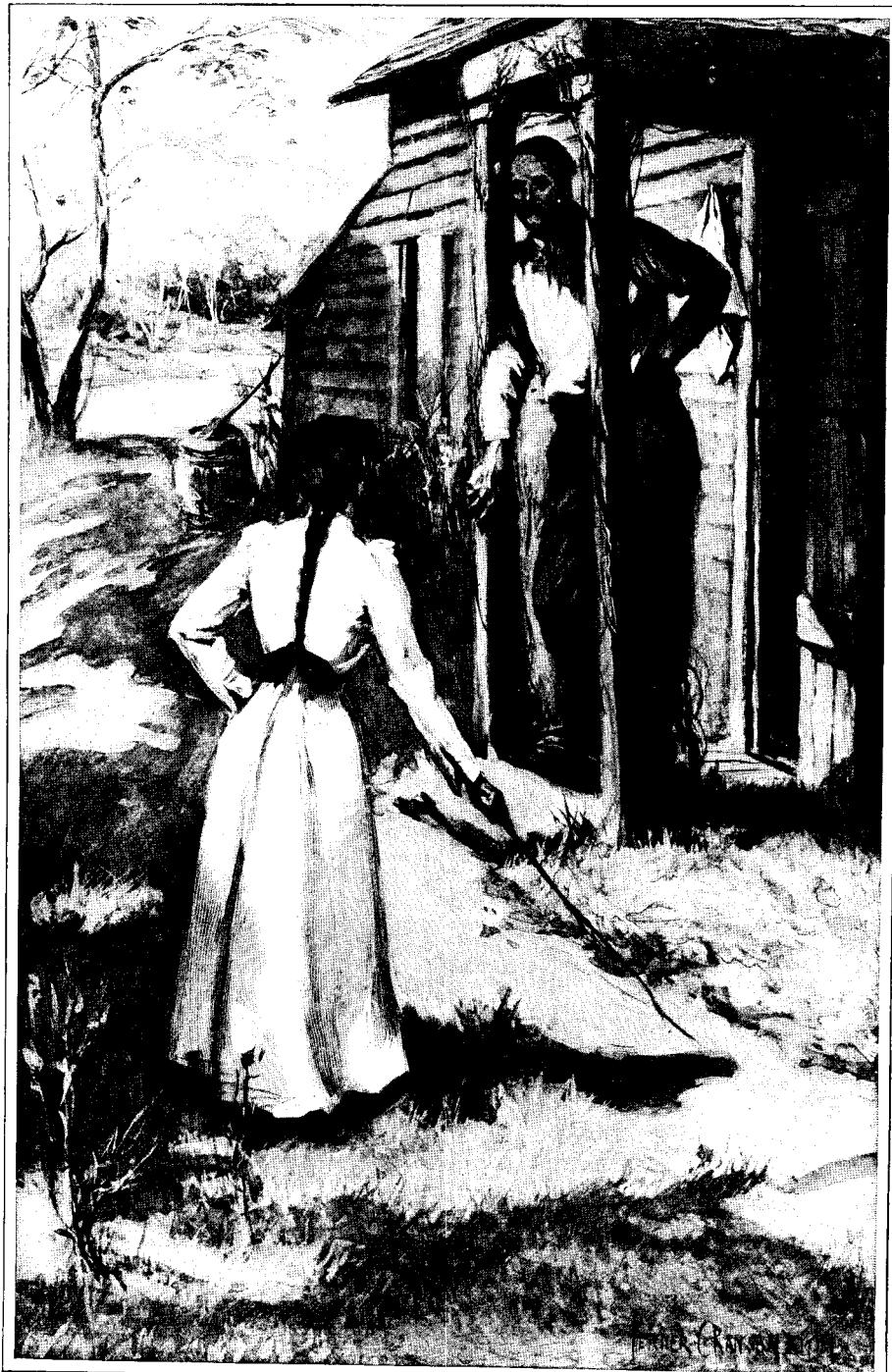
His doglike eyes besought her not to play with such fine ironies; but she sparkled back an answer, and went on:

"Don't you want to know what I'm down here for?"

He answered eagerly, her cruelties forgotten, "Yes, I do."

"Well, Melissa told me you'd jilted her—"

"I didn't jilt her," he continued in haste. The words tumbled tumultuously. Though she jeered at him, he had a pathetic certainty that, after all, she would understand. It was an almost poignant relief, too; for never before had he been able, in speech, to touch upon that mortifying time. "You don't see how it was. She didn't. Nobody does.



Half-tone plate engraved by H. C. Merrill

"ARE YOU THE HERMIT?" SHE INQUIRED

We were going to be married. I liked her real well, and I wanted her to be happy."

A curious expression came over the girl's face. It was that quick, wounded look which betrays a jealous mind.

"I'm a queer chap," Adam went on, in that rush of confidence. "So how was I going to know whether I could make her happy or not? Still, I liked her, and I meant to chance it. But when it was 'most time for us to be married, I got scared. I got so scared I told her so. I bet, if the truth was known, every man jack of 'em's scared before he's married. You ask 'em, and if there's any man in 'em, they'll own it. Well, I owned it to her, and she cried, and Silas Beane he up and married her."

"And you locked your door and came traipsing off down here to make town talk of yourself over all this hermit business," said the girl, sharply. Her eyes were full of angry tears. She felt that unreasoning bitterness from which we wound our beloved when they put themselves in the wrong.

"It wa'n't what you think. I could bear to see her, but I couldn't face being a coward. I couldn't live with other folks. You can't see. You couldn't if you tried a year." Yet at the same instant he was conscious of a warming hopefulness that she could unriddle all the problems likely to concern him.

The girl put out her hand, and then withdrew it before he could guess whether it was for him. "Well," she said, "I must go."

Adam felt himself thrown, with a shock, out of accustomed musings, to face this quick reverse. "No!" he cried, appealingly—"no! you ain't going?"

She was making her way toward the door. He looked at her sharply, in the keenness of his questioning, and he could see that this was quite a different girl from the one who had parted the bushes with that witchlike mien. She was a little pale under her brown skin. Her eyes held something like a troubled tenderness.

"I help Aunt Sarah get the dinner," said she.

"But I don't know what your name is," blundered Adam.

Again she sparkled. Her spirits re-

turned with a dash. "That's no consequence," said she. "You won't have to use it."

He looked at her helplessly, and she laughed. He was so big, so soft and sorry, so like an elephantine puppy lost in the snow.

"What a goose you were," she said, irrelevantly, "to give up Melissa!"

"I didn't give her up!"

"Well, make her give you up. You were a goose. You'd have been living in that nice big house, and Melissa'd have made your pies."

"I don't want her to make my pies!"

"Well," she returned, with her diabolical precision, "I don't know's they'd have been so flaky."

In that instant he resolved that thenceforward this should be a picless house.

She had stepped out of the door, and the spring sunshine fell upon her hair and set a shimmer on every curly crest. "Well," she said, meditatively, "I'm sorry you haven't got Melissa!"

"I wouldn't take the gift of her!" The passion of this defiance he understood as little as the former disquiet the creature had aroused; but he sent it hurtling after her. She was walking away lightly and very rapidly. In an instant the bushes would close upon her. Adam started after, and reached her in a series of strides.

"Say," he began, violently, "you tell me what your name is!"

"Angelica Payne," said she, still walking away. He remembered then. She had been a visitor here before, an ugly, elfin sort of child, and he had strangely forgotten her.

"Angelica Payne!" said he, wonderingly, as he followed her. She was more and also less miraculous now that she had a name. But with a twist of his will he broke the spell, though for an instant only.

"Well," said he, roughly, "what you down here on my land for, anyways?"

She confronted him, and, to keep her composure, called up some weak defiance. But the sparkle had gone out of it. "I wanted to see a man that was afraid to marry a girl," she said, in a poor simulation of scorn.

This time Adam hardly winced. He was going to lose her, and the prospect

held something incomprehensibly poignant. "Angelica!" he called after her, "sha'n't you come down here again?"

She cast a flashing look over her shoulder. Her face was dimpled with fun, but he read also some fine scorn of him. "You're real kind," said she. "Of course I'll come. A man that was afraid to marry a girl would expect other girls to come and call."

Adam groaned in his inability to cope with her, and she went rustling on through the bushes. When the path turned she stopped an instant and again looked back. "Oh, I'll come!" said she, softly. "I'll bring you a receipt for cake!" And he had lost her.

He walked heavily back to the house and sat down upon the step. There he stayed for perhaps an hour, his eyes fixed on a little weed at his feet. He seemed to be learning it by heart, the leaves and the horseshoe shadow on them. But chiefly he mused upon his visitor, and gave some vague cognizance to the strange self she had liberated within him. He thought he knew his own nature to the root, after days of introspection down here alone and nights of reverie; yet all this formulating turned upon his faults. He had a curious scorn of himself, of his great strength, and the softness of heart that made him a child whenever it came to action. He could not even "go gunning" as other fellows did; he was afraid of hitting some warm and palpitating mark, some winged timidity. He could not speak in town-meeting for fear of "hard feelings" somewhere.

The extremity of bathos had come in his hesitating at the altar because he liked Melissa too well to marry her; and following on that, an overkeen sensitiveness brought echoing to his ears those hoots of derision certain to attend his name. So he had shut up his house, sent off old Betsy, who had worked for him ever since his mother's death, and betaken himself to the woods. As a citizen and a man he had become, in his own estimating, a being of no account; and he proposed to spend the rest of these hateful years removed from the men with whom he could not cope, and who must perpetually judge him. But Angelica Payne had arrived. Things

were at once different. He pulled out the scroll of his past life as a man must do for at least one woman, and groaned over its futility. All the day's routine took part in his changed mood. He did not set his orderly dinner table as usual, but stood at the cupboard and ate savagely, showering the floor with crumbs. Nor would he sweep the crumbs away; and at nightfall, when the kitchen, like himself, betrayed some signs of being out of joint, he appraised the confusion and exulted in it. It was a betrayal of man's housekeeping, and that suited him. When she came again she should not flout him.

But she did not come again. The days lagged, while Adam stayed religiously by his own door-stone lest he should miss her. He made curious compromises in his in-door work, striving to earn her approval of man's housekeeping, and yet guessing how she must loathe untidiness. Sometimes he left the floor unswept, and then brushed it up in fevered haste, lest she come and find him doing it. But he made himself fastidiously clean in his own person, since that at least was due her. Toward the end of the third day he had an ache in his throat, the kind from which he had dumbly suffered in childhood when his mother used to go away at rare intervals to spend the night. Later it came again when she died; but he could not remember anybody else who had the power to summon it.

At five o'clock on the afternoon of the fourth day it suddenly occurred to him that Angelica did not mean to come back at all. That certainty was like a blow in the face from a beloved hand. A great reproach welled up in him. It seemed incredible that any human being should treat another with such cruelty. He was standing by his door-stone when that conclusion struck him, and without a second's delay he got his hat and went striding toward the county road. No definite purpose moved his mind. He could hardly seek out the Hawkins family in pursuit of their alluring guest; but he was drawn magnetically toward even the airs enfolding her. He went straight across lots and over a swampy tract spanned by a little bridge; and there she was. It was like a miracle. She was sitting on a bank staring into a



"THE CRUST IS AS FLAKY AS EVER I SEE"

pool of black water, her chin on her hand, her elbow on her knee. The pang in his heart saluted her, and then kept beating on in a sickening joy and pain. Fear it held also, the delicious fear that threatens and denies. She was not in the least like the creature who had baited him that other day. Her face had fallen into musing; the red mouth looked sad. The world was bourgeoning about her, but he could see, through that involuntary comprehension of her which was a part of his nature, that her own thoughts had shut her away even from the spring-time. He had not paused in his swift progress, and these impressions flashed across his mind like the pageant from

a moving train. At one plunging step she looked up, and the quiet of her attitude broke as a ripple stirs within a stream. She did not utter a sound, but her eyes dilated, and she grew a little paler. Adam stood before her, breathing hard. He took off his hat and passed his fingers through his moistened hair. He spoke with bitterness:

"You never meant to come!"

Angelica had in that moment been summoning new forces. Her cheeks grew warmer. Her eyes were suddenly alive with something bound to mock at him. "Come where?" she asked.

Instantly he remembered the taunt she had tossed him in farewell, and he

could not run the risk of hearing it again. "You said a lot of things to me the other day," he began, shifting his ground.

"Did I?" answered the girl, innocently. "Did I talk too much?"

"You said a lot about my going with Melissa!"

"Oh no! I guess I didn't do that. I don't care anything about your going with Melissa."

"I do!" He was passionately desirous of proving his point. He would protest, explain. She must believe him.

"Oh, do you? I'm real sorry. But it's too late now. She's married to Silas Beane, and he ain't the kind of man to give her up."

Again she was trying to hurt him. He knew that, and looked at her in an acquiescent helplessness. She seemed to be equipped at every point with stings warranted to wound.

"I swear!" he cried. And then some strange impulse made him add, "If you ain't a little devil!"

Her face crinkled up into a bewilderment of fun. If she was a little devil, it was plain she liked to be. She rose and patted her hair into place. A shower of green things had fallen on it from above. They were the drift of the growing year, and somehow, seeing them so tangled there, the spring choked Adam, and he felt the foolishness of talk. This woman creature had turned him into a mass of quivering sensations. She hurt; she delighted. She was his tormentor, his angel, his heart's darling, and his foe. Great burning tears came into his eyes. The impossibility of her understanding at this point—nay, the impossibility of quite understanding himself—kept him silent and made his bruised heart doubly sore.

"You're real polite," remarked Angelica. "I guess I'll be going."

She turned demurely and walked away from him. Adam walked after. He could not call to her as he had the other day, because that somehow seemed to belong to the man he was, and was no longer. He could only endure these queer feelings within, and march along, fitting his stride to her irregular pace. They kept the black cart-path, enlaced above and fringed with ferns below;

but when they neared the border of the bushes where the open meadow lay beyond, the girl stopped. Her voice quivered a little, as if she felt some new mastery; but she chose her words from the same mocking vocabulary.

"You better not go any further," she said.

"Why?" Question and answer seemed to him significant. His voice was trembling.

"Somebody might see you!"

"What's the harm in that?"

"Ain't you hiding?" she asked, innocently. "If you come out among folks, you won't be a hermit any more. Good-by." She walked a step without looking at him, and Adam overtook her.

"Stop!" he said, and she stopped, though she did murmur to herself,

"The idea!"

"You seem to think I'm no kind of a man because I said that to Melissa," he began. "Perhaps I ain't. I don't lay claim to much. I want to ask you this: What would you say if a man said it to you?"

The girl turned, in a quick access of feeling. She looked straight into his face, and her eyes were burning. "I should say," she flashed, "that I didn't care whether I was happy or not—if I liked him."

The landscape seemed to engulf her, she was so swiftly gone. The fringing birches closed as she melted into them, and the air betrayed no echo of her step. Adam did not follow. He turned about as quickly, and went back to his lake. It was without conscious resolution that he strode into the little house; yet there was no shade of indecision in what he did. He opened the cupboard door and took out the scanty relies left from food which had of late contented him, and piled them in a milk-pan. These he carried out of doors and dumped in a hollow where the birds were accustomed to find provender. The water thrown from his pail, he gave one swift glance about him for anything perishable that might not be left behind. There was a blue apron hanging by the door. His eye fell upon it, and he flushed deeply, with rage at his heart. It was an insignia of disgrace, and he seized it in his hands as if to tear it. That instant he remembered



"NOW," SAID SHE, "I HOPE FOLKS 'LL GIVE UP TALKIN'"

that it was his mother's apron, and he rolled it with a remorseful tenderness and thrust it on a cupboard shelf. Then he went out, shut the door upon the life he had been living, and walked away without one look behind. Neither had he apprehending eyes for the woods where such months of seclusion had been passed, though now they were full of a great significance. Twilight was coming, and peace enwrapped them like a garment. There were little rustlings and stirrings among green leaves, although the breeze had fallen.

The sharp liquid peep of frogs came from the distance, and a nearer shrill ing kept the measure.

Adam had at one time felt that he was as much a part of this elemental harmony as he could be of anything. He had learned unformulated things out of it, out of the look of the sky and the way the wind blew, out of long level reaches of land. He had not been happy, because with his strange, tumultuous nature he was not happy anywhere; but here at least there was peace, and he had

not meant to be drawn from it into that turmoil tolerated by other men. But now some note had sounded, clear and compelling, out of the myriad noises of the moving world. It was for him. The imagined sound of rushing sap and the greatening of leaves, that universal movement of the growing year, had seemed to him the most significant thing created; but suddenly that potency yielded as an army parts for a chieftain with banners, and he must answer. He had withdrawn from life. He must return. But this was not thought within him: only a resistless impulse that sent him, with a whirring in his head, straight back to his old home. There, arriving after six o'clock, he opened the house to the renewing air. A man on a passing team gave him a cordial, "H'are ye?" and that night the news spread that Adam had come back.

Melissa Beane, straining the milk in the dairy, heard it from her husband, and her meek face flushed a little.

"Now," said she, in her tepid way, "I hope folks 'll give up talkin'?"

Her husband, scented from the barn and oxlike in good-humor, set down the last milk-pail and took a spear of hay from his trousers. He pulled it absorbently through his fingers and fell into the process serving him for thought. Silas was a clumsily chiselled figure, all honesty and good-will. "Might as well," said he. "I never knew what all this hurrah-boys was about, anyhow." He lounged away to wash his hands, vaguely soothed by Adam's return to life. A certain disquieting feeling had hung over him that he was in some fashion responsible for this hermit business, and he had an impression that the sooner everybody settled down to their farming, the better.

Melissa drew a sigh over the milk. She, too, had been more or less puzzled by the little drama where she had played so dazed a part. Adam had always embarrassed her by his queer ways and panics over nothing; but she had a kindly feeling for him, and she was easier in her mind now that he had assumed the ways of men.

That night Adam went to bed without any supper, and next morning he tramped to Sudleigh, five miles away, took some money out of the bank, and bought a horse and wagon. Then he drove five miles farther and asked old Betsy Norcross to come and live with him. Betsy was overjoyed. She had known him from a baby, and she was used to all his ways. Nothing he did was comprehensible, and nothing was wrong. She hastily packed her little hair trunk and dressed herself in her best. She was a slender creature with a peaked face, most loving eyes, and a quizzical mouth; and she wore a rusty crepe shawl and a bonnet that looked as if it had been built by some eccentric and untidy bird. Now she mounted the wagon in a state as exalted as a bride. Adam took his place beside her, and they drove away. Betsy was thinking how well Adam had suited her, and he suddenly remembered how perfectly she had suited him.

"Say, Betsy," he began, as they drove under the quickening elms, "could you stay right along?"

Betsy nodded, brimful of happiness. Because she was silent, Adam looked at her, and she nodded again.

"Would you stay if there was somebody at the head of the house?"

Betsy darted a look at him. "You goin' to git married?" she asked.

"Would you stay?" repeated Adam.

"Law, bless you, yes!" said Betsy. "I'm real glad. That 'll be complete."

Betsy cleaned the house, and she and Adam set about the business of life. He bought cows and a yoke of oxen, and, though late, began his planting. The neighbors dropped in at odd times, and one after another they got used to his return. The women would borrow a cup of yeast from Betsy and ask a careless question, and they found her loquacious on every topic save what concerned Adam. When he met them, men or women, he was so commonplace that his "crazed spell" dropped into abeyance. It seemed like the vanity which is less than nothing in the face of this great creature who walked about his farm doing deeds with an unerring hand.

But Adam hardly knew what he was thinking in those days while he harnessed himself to the needs of earth. He was perhaps not thinking at all. Only he was throbibly conscious of the spring life about him, like the god Pan set to plough furrows, feeling the earth riot and surge and tremble, and yet ploughing and ploughing for a purpose, and not even willing to escape. He said very little to old Betsy; but she set his food before him and made the house a miracle of neatness. Nobody told her when the bride would come. Nobody had told Adam either, even his own hot purpose; but the old woman and the young man worked together with equal paces and according aim.

All this time Angelica Payne, growing a little paler hour by hour, sat within-doors, sewing. Her aunt wondered at her, because an errant will had always taken her out into the woods and fields at any interval of the day or night. Melissa was worried, and begged her to drive or walk; but Angelica denied them gently, and sat by the window with head bowed over her seam.

"Now what you want to make so many things for?" said her comfortable aunt. "Trimmed to the nines, too! Anybody'd think 'twas your settin' out."

One night when the planting was all

done and the year was still between promise and its bloom, Adam made himself very clean, and started out along the county road. Old Betsy watched him away. She made fantastic gestures at his back, translating her good-will; then she sat down on the steps and thought of life—chiefly what a big baby Adam had been, and what a freckled boy. Betsy was happy. She often said she had better luck than most, because she had always lived with her own kind of folks.

Adam walked along, neither fast nor slow, and in the darkening turn of the road where the pines meet and there is the sound of running water, he saw Angelica Payne. She was dressed in white, and her face was very pale. The dusk was thin enough for him to see how black and soft her eyes were, and how still she carried herself. She looked like a bride, and a great tenderness calmed his manner toward her. She seemed very little and very young, something miraculously accorded him to protect as well as to adore. She walked up to him, and he took her hands.

"Did you come to meet me?" he asked her gently.

"I don't know," said Angelica. "I came." Their hearts beat thickly, but they beat with an according measure.

"Should you be ready to marry me by

to-morrow?" asked Adam, as if he inquired about the weather.

"Yes," said Angelica, like one speaking out of a dream.

"Should you rather I'd come and see you at the house a few times first?"

"Oh no!" said Angelica, "not unless you'd rather."

"You know what folks 'll say about me! They'll always remember I was queer and went off into the woods!"

"Yes," said Angelica. She was leaning her head against his arm, and thinking his coat smelled of the earth, the spring earth with its imperious promises.

"They may say I couldn't get Melissa after all! Can you get along with that?"

"Not get Melissa?" she repeated, absently. "Poor Melissa!"

They stood silent, the dusk sifting down about them. Angelica, in a flash, recovered her old fire.

"Do you s'pose you're going to make me happy?" she asked, audaciously.

The silence thrilled like unknown, poignant speech. Adam was meeting his hunger for her, his certainty of having found something which was all his own.

"I don't believe I care," said he, "whether I do or not."

Then he lifted her until her eyes were level with his, and kissed her.